

The Alexander Thomson Society Newsletter

Nº29, JULY 2001



**At last a fitting
memorial?**

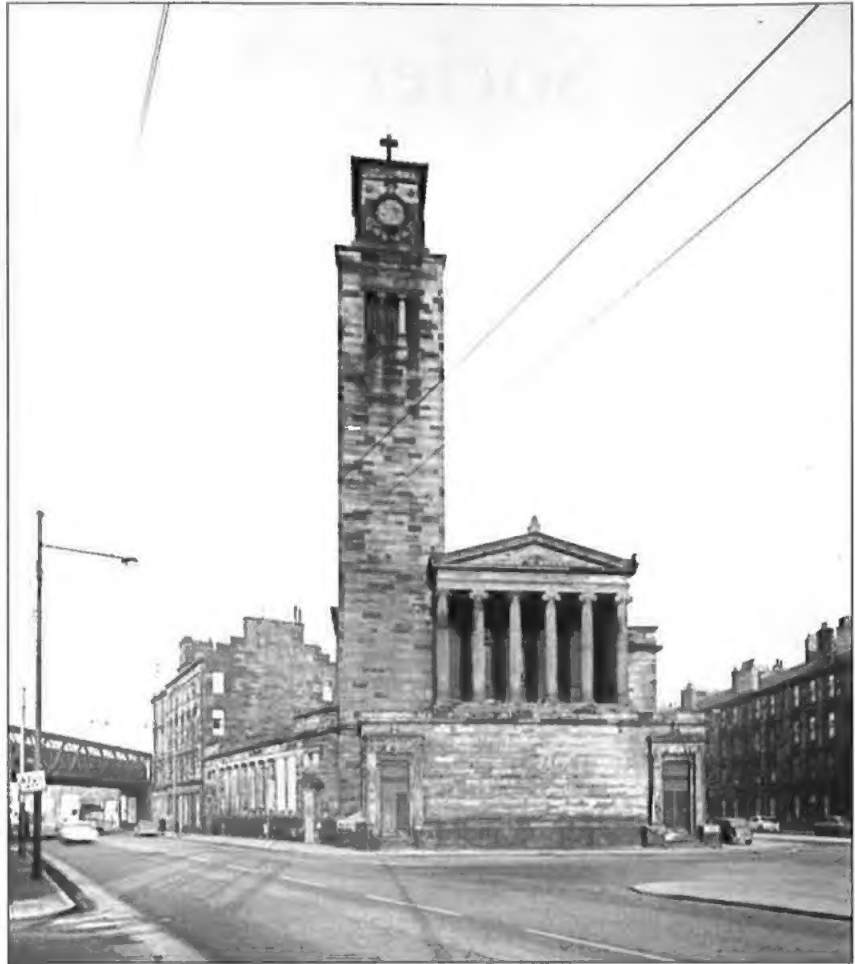
Cases

Caledonia Road Church

THE LONG-AWAITED competition to build on the site behind the Caledonia Road Church and so make some sense and purpose of the ruin may, at last, be nearing fruition – although it is rumoured that the Council may be having second thoughts about demolishing the adjacent railway viaduct which is an essential part of the plan. Meanwhile, Tom Macartney of the Crown Street Regeneration Trust has commissioned repairs to stabilise the structure of Thomson's cruelly abused masterpiece and the roof on the top of the tower – removed in 1993 – has been happily replaced. A floodlighting system was turned on the evening of July 8th, coinciding, as it happens, with Murray Grigor's new television programme on Thomson (*see below*).

But it is difficult not to feel pessimistic about the Caledonia Road Church. After all, the authorities have been trying to get rid of it ever since Glasgow Corporation obligingly left the door of the redundant church open in 1965, with predictable consequences.

What we are still up against was confirmed by an article in the *Sunday Herald* for 27th May by James Boyle. As far as we could glean any argument from his incoherent ramblings, Mr Boyle



Caledonia Road Church, intact and with its neighbouring tenements.

was expressing that easy, fatuous prejudice that to have good new architecture requires the demolition of the old – although Glasgow as it is today surely represents the futility of such vapid posturing. But what matters is that he began by writing: "Please join me in wishing that someone in high civic office has the resolution to pull down the ghastly Alexander 'Greek' Thomson-designed Caledonia Road Church presently preserved like a cadaver on the south side of the city of Glasgow..."

Such philistinism – "arrogance or ignorance" – was countered by Murray Grigor in a letter the following week, but what is disturbing is how deeply entrenched such attitudes are in Glasgow. Long ago, in 1967,

that brilliant critic, the late Ian Nairn, wrote in his book, *Britain's Changing Towns*, how "Unless the city wakes up to a sense of its own greatness, Glasgow is headed for disaster. There seems no break in the bland self-confident surface that doesn't care and doesn't want to care. This is true philistinism, and when they have a mind to the Lowland Scots can do it better than anyone else... Caledonia Road church is a burnt-out shell, waiting for some self-congratulatory act of demolition..." Thirty-four years later, we have Jimmy Boyle willing to perform the task.

Of course, Mr Boyle's published opinion was ostensibly a personal one, but when it is realised that he

speaks with the tacit authority of his role as chairman of the Scottish Arts Council, we can only fear for the arts – and architecture – in Scotland.

Egyptian Halls

THE FATE of Thomson's finest commercial building – and surely one of the most extraordinary and interesting commercial structures of its time in Britain – remains a worry.

The refurbishment scheme proposed by Peter Stephen & Partners, engineers, and the Morrison Partnership, architects, for Derek Soutar of Union Street Properties ought to be welcomed, for it respects the integrity of Thomson's building, inside and out, and – if carried out – ought to set a new standard in Glasgow for the conservative, intelligent restoration of an historic fabric.

Yet Historic Scotland seems unwilling to grant-aid the scheme to a sufficient extent to make it viable, despite the fact that, a few years back, it was prepared to offer much more money to achieve the realisation of a much more destructive refurbishment scheme. We find this most puzzling and disheartening, and are awaiting clarification from Historic Scotland.



Wellington Street / West Regent Street: Thomson's former office, now slowly rotting, but possibly with a resolution in sight.

Wellington Street / West Regent Street

HERE THERE seems to be good news. As reported in Newsletters 27 and 28, the planned public enquiry into the fate of the building enlarged by Thomson and which contained his office, was cancelled owing to an appeal by County Properties under the Human Rights Act upheld by Lord Macfadyen in the Court of Sessions, thereby bringing into question the legality of the current planning system in both Scotland and England. This now seems to have been resolved by a judgement in the House of Lords announced on 9th May.

The County Properties case was included under the umbrella of the Alconbury case, which was one of three planning appeals which "raise broadly the same question as to whether certain decision making processes of the Secretary of State for the

Environment, Transport and the Regions ... are compatible with article 6(1) of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1953) (Cmd 8969) as incorporated in the Human Rights Act 1998. There was a consequential question as to whether if these processes are not compatible there should be a declaration under section 4 of the 1998 Act."

As far as we can understand the lengthy legal judgement, their Lordships decided that the relevant appeals at public inquiry were in fact compatible with the Human Rights Act, and that this therefore includes the County Properties case. We therefore await confirmation from Historic Scotland that the cancelled public enquiry over Thomson's building in Wellington Street can now go ahead as planned. We were all ready to give evidence, and still are.

Grigor Returns

MURRAY GRIGOR once made a television film on Mackintosh as a whistle-blowing sequel, showing that, despite the 1968 Exhibition and the growing world-wide interest in his work, several of Mackintosh's buildings in Glasgow remained in danger. Now he has done the same for Thomson, in a short programme broadcast in early July as part of Scottish Television's *Artery* strand.

It now seems as if 1999, Glasgow's Year as City of Architecture and Design, never was. Despite the Thomson Exhibition at the Lighthouse, the accompanying book and Murray's own superb film, *Nineveh on the Clyde*, the cause of better architecture in Glasgow still seems a fond dream while several of Thomson's buildings – notably Egyptian Halls – remain in danger. It is all very depressing.

The programme used clips from the 1999 film combined with interviews with a number of key players who discuss what has gone wrong and what ought to happen now. We never expected Thomson to achieve the semi-mystical superstar status of poor misunderstood Toshie, but we did think that Thomson had regained his status as Glasgow's other great and original architect, and the



The winning design for Thomson's tomb that never was, in situ in the Southern Necropolis for Murray Grigor's latest programme – albeit created from MDF rather than stone.

architectural hero of the Victorian city.

There was some good news in the programme: Mark Baines discussed the plan to refurbish the surviving warehouse in Watson Street at Gorbals Cross and Sally White, property manager at Holmwood, talked of future plans for restoration at what is the one real success story in the campaign to rehabilitate Thomson.

The most intriguing part of the programme, however, is when a full-sized mock-up of the Alexander Thomson Travelling Studentship-winning

design for a new tomb to go on Thomson's unmarked grave is seen slowly moving through the Southern Necropolis.

It remains depressing – and an insult to a great man's memory – that, two years on, this project remains unrealised but – thanks to the generosity of Gordon Murray and Alan Dunlop, Architects, who have guaranteed the current financial shortfall – this particular great hope of 1999 should achieve concrete form before not too long.

Nightmare on St Vincent Street

A £14m HOTEL and housing development next to St Vincent Street Church has been given planning permission, despite being criticised as 'an attack on Glasgow's reputation as a civilised city' by the secretary of the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland.

What follows is drawn from two reports by Christine Ferguson for financial newspaper *Business a.m.*

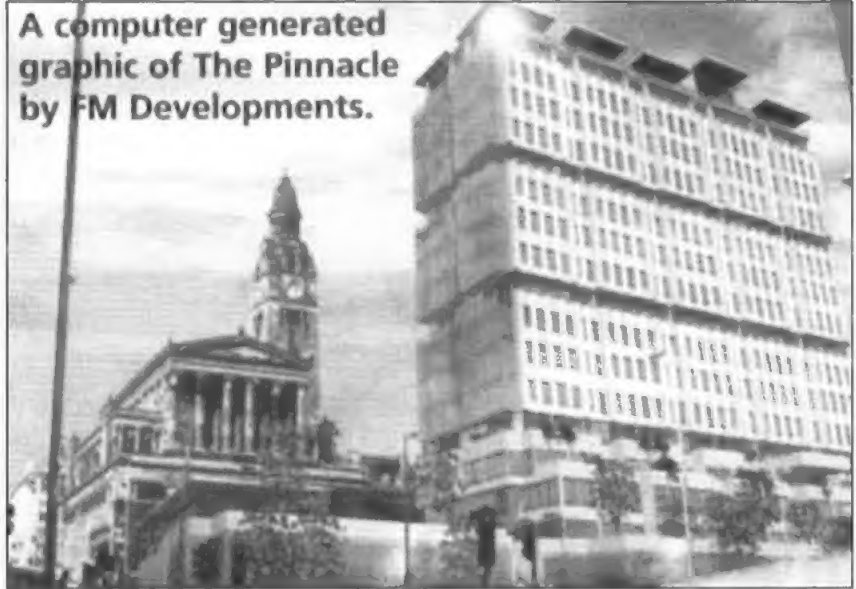
Planning permission has been granted for a £14m hotel and housing development next to one of the city Glasgow's architectural jewels, despite stinging criticism from a leading heritage group.

An Edinburgh company, FM Developments, has been told it can go ahead with proposals to convert Heron House into a development including 91 flats, a 74-bedroom hotel, a restaurant, bar, shops, offices, and leisure facilities.

The project has been widely criticised, because Heron House is situated next to the historic Alexander "Greek" Thomson St Vincent Street Church in the city centre. It is listed by the World Monuments Trust as one of its 100 most endangered sites.

The Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland, which gives advice to the government and local authorities, slated the plan for Heron House, which will see the building's walls overclad

A computer generated graphic of The Pinnacle by FM Developments.



with silver-coloured aluminium panels.

The commission wanted the 1970s complex demolished and a new, more complementary building constructed in its place. However, despite the outcry, the city council granted planning approval, subject to conditions, and work is due to start.

The secretary of the fine art commission, Charles Prosser, said: "Glasgow should be ashamed. "On one hand, you have a Greek Thomson church of world importance and on the other a wreck of a building which should have been demolished and now is being re-clad."

He added: "This is an attack on the reputation of Glasgow as a civilized city."

Heron House, which used to house a Habitat store on its

ground floor, has been vacant for some time.

Kevin Donaldson, an architect with Gilbert Associates in Edinburgh, which designed the capital's Apex Hotel and will be involved in the Glasgow project, said they planned to give the eyesore building a more modern appearance.

He said: "The buildings have lain empty for years and I'm sure the new development will bring life back to this part of the town, 24 hours a day."

The residential part of the development will include seven two-storey glass fronted penthouses, each of about 1,500 sq ft., with some apartments on three levels, at selling prices from £90,000 to £300,000. At ground floor level (where the former Habitat store was) there will be leisure facilities and a bar/restaurant.

On the St Vincent frontage

Continued on Page 15

Missionaries on the Mersey

DID George Thomson, Alexander's architect-brother turned missionary, and Mary Slessor, perhaps Dundee's most famous missionary daughter, ever meet?

That was the intriguing question raised by a Society member recently. Intriguing not just because of the historical coincidence of two missionaries doing so, but because of a much more modern connection: the presence of Mary Slessor and George Thomson's brother, Alexander, on Clydesdale Bank banknotes.

George Thomson, as members will know, turned his back on the architectural practice he shared with his brother to fulfil a long-held ambition to travel to Africa. His aim was to construct a hospital in West Africa where missionaries could recover their health. He wished to do so in an area commonly referred to as 'The White Man's Grave', the result of the large numbers of deaths of missionaries, traders and military personnel, often from malaria.

Mary Slessor was born in 1848 in Gilcomston, Aberdeen, her family moving to Dundee when Mary was eight. Three years later she began working in a factory. By the age of eleven she was in charge of her own weaving machine, working ten hours a day, but soon, initially inspired by a biography of David Livingstone, she began thinking of a life as a missionary teacher. Eventually,



Neighbours of note: Alexander Thomson (above) on the Clydesdale Bank's commemorative £20 note of 1999, and Mary Slessor (below) on the continuing £10 series.



after working fourteen years in the Dundee mills while teaching children at her local church, she was accepted by the Mission Board of the United Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh as a teacher in Calabar, west Africa. In 1876 she sailed from Liverpool for Africa, working there as a missionary, teacher, and Government Agent until her death in 1915.

Finding out whether Mary Slessor and George Thomson had met proved a challenge: there have been several biographies of her, and one

Memoir of him (written by his nephew, J.E.H. Thomson), and the member who posed the question thought the answer might lie in one of the several biographies of the Dundonian missionary. But Mary Slessor's biographers have tended to concentrate on how she determined to be a missionary, and what she did when she got there, rather than what happened *en route*.

Finally, in W.P. Livingstone's *Mary Slessor the White Queen*, originally published as *The White Queen of Okoyong* in 1915, appears a passage:

On an autumn morning in 1876 Mary Slessor stood on the deck of the steamer *Ethiopia* in Liverpool docks and waved good-bye to two companions from Dundee who had gone to see her off. As the vessel cleared the land and moved out into the wide spaces of the waters she, who had always lived in narrow streets, felt as if she were on holiday, and was in as high spirits as any schoolgirl. She could not help being kind and helpful to others, and soon made friends with many of the passengers and crew.

One man drew her like a magnet. This was Mr. Thomson, an architect from Glasgow, who was filled with the idea that the missionaries in West Africa would do better work and remain out longer if there were some cool place near at hand to which they could go for a rest and change. He had been all over the Coast, and explored the rivers and hills, and had at last found a healthy spot five thousand feet up on the Cameroon Mountain, where he decided to build a home. He had given up his business, and was now on his way out, with his wife and two workmen, to put his dream into shape. Mary's eyes shone as she listened to his tale of love and sacrifice; but alas! the plan, so beautiful, so full of hope for the missionaries, came to nothing, for he died not long after landing.

It was from Mr. Thomson that she learned most about the strange country to which she was going. He told her how it was covered with thick bush and forest; how swift, mud-coloured rivers came out of mysterious lands which had never been seen by white men; how the sun

shone like a furnace-fire, and how sudden hurricanes of rain and wind came and swept away huts and uprooted trees. He described the wild animals he had seen – huge hippopotami and crocodiles in the creeks; elephants, leopards, and snakes in the forest; and lovely hued birds that flashed in the sunlight – until her eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed as they had done in the old days when she listened to the stories told by her mother.

Everything that Livingstone writes about George Thomson matches the description of him in his nephew's *Memoir*: the determination to find an architectural solution to the missionaries' ill-health; the years spent in planning and finding a suitable location; his early death, but above all, George Thomson's love of nature. That dates back to George's Balfour childhood, and the walks he and his brothers would take in the Stirlingshire countryside together with their mother's brother James Cooper, the former sailor now a landlocked invalid. In J.E.H. Thomson's *Memoir*, references to George's fascination with nature, both African and Scottish, abound (as I hope to report in a future *Newsletter*). Even in his later years, Scotland loomed large:

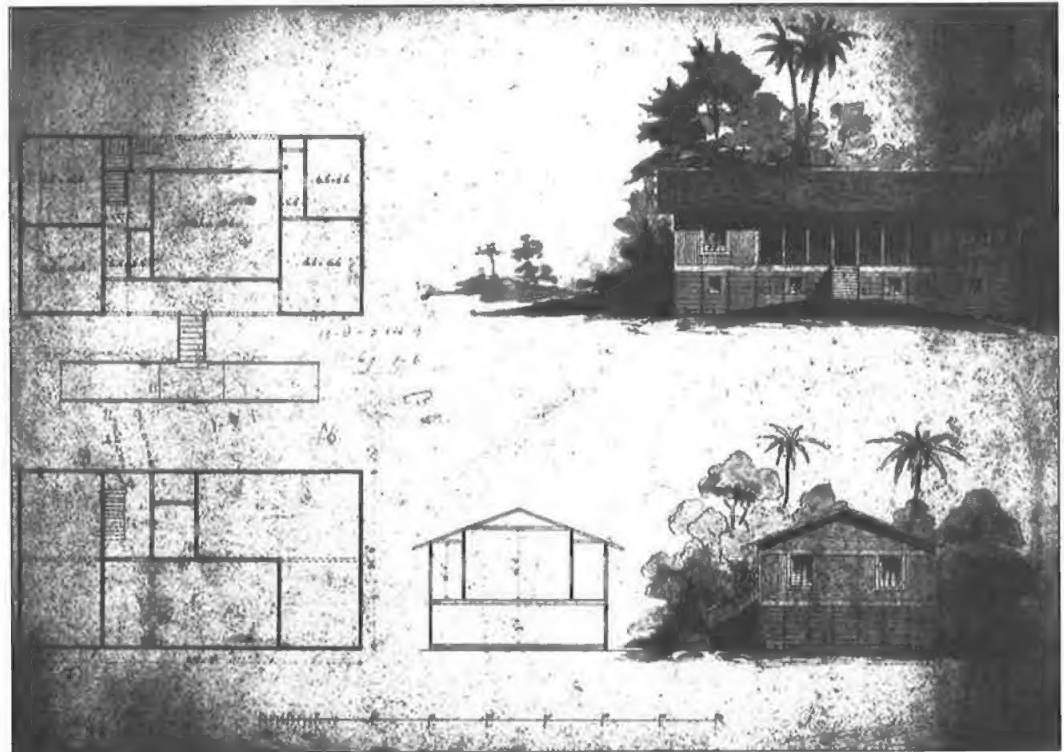
Among his papers there is a fragment of a letter to an old friend, Mr. James Barr, who had emigrated to New Zealand; it seems a scroll, and possibly may never have been completed and

sent. After acknowledging his negligence in true penitential fashion, he proceeds:

'You and Archibald are often in my thoughts, and the rambles we used to have by the Paisley Canal and elsewhere in the bright summer mornings are still recalled with keen delight, – the more, perhaps, that we are so far separated from the actual scenes. Although Govan is not what it was in those days, and great changes have come over the Kelvin and the Canal, although we ourselves are not just what we were then, – Still there remains a dewy freshness in the remembrances of early days which the events and scenes of more advanced life do not possess.'

But Livingstone's biography raises questions as well as solves them: *Mary Slessor the White Queen* was published as the children's version of his much larger biography of the missionary, and there, the meeting with George Thomson is entirely omitted. Instead, there comes the often-told story of Miss Slessor's bemusement at finding herself on a ship (usually identified as the *Ethiopia*) surrounded by barrels of spirits: "Scores of casks of rum and only one missionary!"

Nor at any point does Livingstone give his sources, although there is a substantial Mary Slessor archive in her home town of Dundee, including letters written from Old Calabar back to Scotland, in which the Thomson reference may appear. And since Livingstone writes in



reported speech, what did Mary Slessor herself actually say?

Then there's the question arising from George Thomson's death in 1878, one which Gavin Stamp had raised separately after a reading of J.E.H. Thomson's *Memoir*: did George Thomson ever actually build his hospital?

Ronald McFadzean in his seminal biography of George's brother Alexander, *The Life and Works of Alexander Thomson*, shows an illustration of the intended building, reproduced above. But Livingstone's report suggests that no such building was ever constructed.

Yet even if George Thomson did not create his sanatorium, he does seem to have opened the way for one to be built. The *Memoir* records how a road was cleared from the base of the mountain to Mann's Spring, how way-stations were established *en route*, and how an initial building had been erected at the chosen site for the sanatorium. This was, it is

true, a very modest affair (*right*), as Thomson himself describes in March 1878 to his wife, at that time convalescing in England:

'You will be curious to know what sort of house we have got here. Well, it is externally very like a towsy, ill-built haystack, for not only is the roof thatched with grass, but the walls also. The inside dimensions are about twenty-four by fifteen feet; it is divided along the centre by a passage, on either side of which are spaces for lounging and sleeping; the passage space is separated from the sleeping spaces, not by partitions, but simply by stout logs to keep in grass bedding;— a very necessary precaution, for the fires are made in the passage and as wood is plentiful and the nights cold, we have three rousing fires going. Fear of accident from fire has often kept me awake great part of the night. I doubt if Mr. Frame would insure us for any premium. Now that the consul is here, we have partitioned off about half the space of the house by suspending a long sheet across.

'The above sketch and plan may aid you in forming some idea of

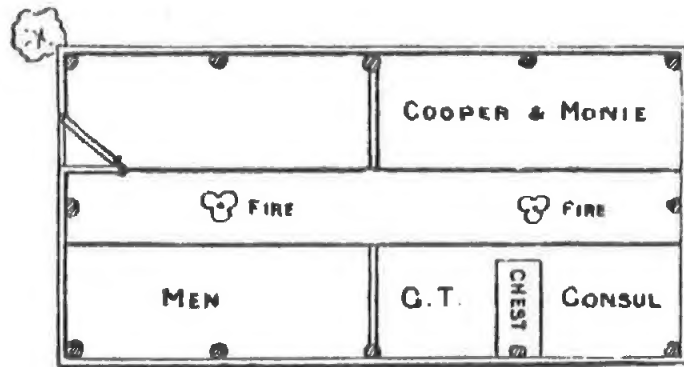
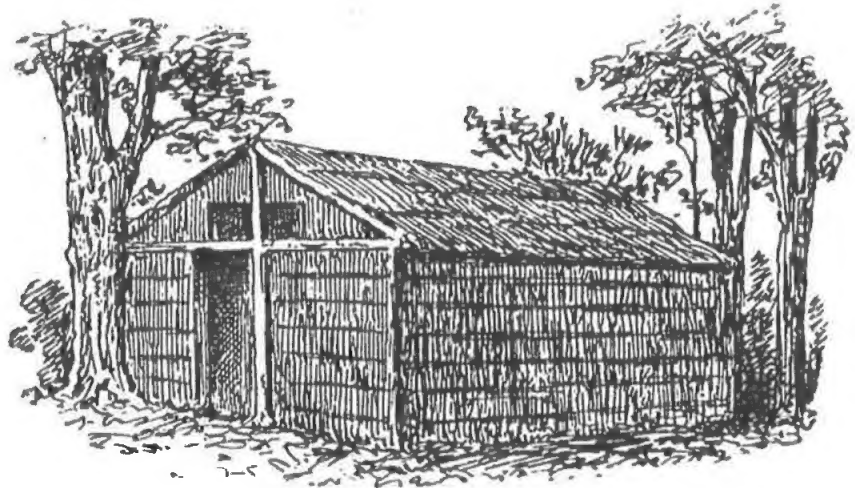
the first house erected at Mann's Spring. The walls are constructed of the stems of a tall, straight-growing plant which is found in abundance just at hand; they are from one to three inches in diameter, and from ten to twelve feet in height. The lower and thicker part of these stems I have caused to be lashed side by side with bush rope, and braced to longitudinal bars of the same material, which makes a fine stiff wall; the thatch is required, however, to make them air-tight. One corner of the house is secured to a large tree, which, being too big for us to cut down, we utilized as a support. The erection is, like other houses in this region, remarkable in so far that neither nail nor peg is used in its construction; with the exception of a little bush rope, the whole of the materials were found on the ground, or within cry of the site.'

That George Thomson was convinced he had found the right location was undoubted, as he wrote to his wife:

'Monday, 25th.— ...This is a glorious place. How I wish you were here to enjoy it with me! I feel as if it will be our home for

some period. Down in the forest there are noble trees, far surpassing anything in Britain; some are very majestic, while others are picturesque, and others again of the most weird and fantastic appearance. Mr. Q. W. Thomson [Quintin Thomson, a Baptist missionary, no relation] and I measured one, and found it thirty-six feet in circumference. The Boanda men have opened up a considerable length of the new road from the spring downwards, as they promised, and they are doing it very well indeed; so far, it is a great improvement on that which they cut in coming up. There are some charming bits of forest scenery in its course. I have fixed on a site for our house: it is a knoll a little way down from the spring, the water of which can be led down to it and into it by means of pipes. It is surrounded by some grand trees; but when a few in the immediate vicinity are removed, it will be quite open to the sunshine, while at the same time it will be secured from the fires kindled annually by the hunters on the open country, and will also be sheltered from storms.'

Spring and early summer in 1878 seem to have been spent in concentrated effort to prepare the ground for the new sanatorium. But in April came bad news, when he learned of the death of his nephew William Cooper Thomson, son of George's half-brother, also William Cooper, who had died as a missionary in Sierra Leone in 1843. William Cooper II died on the 22nd March, exactly three years after Alexander's death. George had



George Thomson's sketch of the hut he constructed on Mount Cameroon as a precursor to the sanatorium he intended to build. Cooper and Monie were natives of Cameroon.

hoped that his nephew would join him in the Cameroon venture: a former missionary, William Cooper II had returned to Scotland and become a doctor, practising in Liverpool and Partick. George wrote to one of his nieces living at 1 Moray Place:

'I feel William's death very greatly, there are so few left now of my early friends. Although a nephew, his age was so little less than my own, that I regarded him more as a brother.'

There was good news also, as the *Memoir* records:

About the end of July, he was cheered on receiving a letter from Mr. Hutchinson, lay secretary of the Church Missionary Society, making careful inquiries as to the

amount of labour needful to set up a sanatorium on the mountain, and the best mode of securing it. The Church Missionary Society were anxious to secure a suitable place for their agents from the Yoruba and the Niger to resort to when invalided. His choice had been the result of careful study, he says; and this of necessity gave Mr. Thomson to feel that confidence in his own opinion which arises from others arriving independently at the same conclusions. One thing especially to be noted, is the anxiety that Mr. Hutchinson manifests not to do anything that would be regarded as intrusion by the Baptist Missionary Society or their agents. Mr. Thomson, in concert with his friend the Rev. Quintin Thomson, wrote answering all

the queries, and expressed a cordial wish that they too should set up a sanatorium in the mountain.

George also seems to have been building a home for himself and his wife in the Cameroons capital of Victoria, where his attempts to continue with the sanatorium were hampered by concerns over business matters.

George had had to engage in commerce while living in Victoria, operating a store: he disliked it, recognised that it was a distraction from his principal aim, and sought to have his commercial interests taken over by others.

A young man named Macdonald had been engaged to be his assistant in the store. He was in delicate health, but thought that the sea-voyage might benefit him, and followed Mr. Thomson by a short interval to Victoria. Despite his own hopes and medical opinion, poor Macdonald never thrived in Africa. Of course, from the nature of his duties, he had to stay on the coast, and that in Africa is always unhealthy. Mr. Thomson had thus the main burden of the work, and meanwhile was erecting a house for his wife and himself. The care and sheer physical labour entailed were great, and, in such a climate, especially oppressive. In a letter, dated November 6, 1878, he is able to say that the

house is pretty well forward. He gives a plan of it, in order that his friends at home might have some idea of 'Inverquhat,' as he jokingly calls it.

Macdonald's health worsened, and it became necessary to send him back to Britain. The mail steamer bound for Fernando Po was found to be due, so the two men hurried there, 'with little time for preparation':

The voyage was a long and tedious one, but they were in time to get the patient on board the steamer. Mr. Thomson sent home by this steamer the last letter he wrote; in it he mentions having felt insufficiently clothed. In almost



The Alexander Thomson Society

10th Birthday Event

Holmwood, Friday 31st August 2001

from 6.45pm until 10.00ish

News on Thomson's buildings • The latest from Holmwood • Things to see, hear and buy

Refreshments provided. Entrance at the door: £3

A FREE BUS leaves North Hanover Street (adjacent to Queen Street Station) at 6.00pm and returns there after the event

the last sentence of this, his last letter, he says, 'I have arranged with Mr. Grenfell to take charge of the store, which will relieve me of a great burden'.

Grenfell had been a missionary, but now wanted to enter into trade; George was happy to sell his business to him, not just to enable his own work to continue, but also because of his concern that whatever trading should be undertaken there should be fair on the native population.

Back in Victoria, however, a stocktake was needed before the business changed hands:

...the most grievous defalcations came to light. Lads supposed to be trustworthy servants had been cheating in the most wholesale way. On this discovery his heart seemed to sink within him, and he complained of illness. He had purposed going up the mountain, and preparations were being made for this, but he grew rapidly worse.

By now, his wife Isabella had returned to Cameroon. The *Memoir* records her account of his death:

'On Thursday evening, the 5th December, he returned from Fernando Po, where he had gone with Mr. Macdonald to see him safely on board a steamer for England. He returned in excellent spirits, very happy to be home again, and entered pretty fully into the details of his trip.

'On Friday he seemed in his usual health; during the following night he was feverish, but perspired freely, and next morning took his breakfast as

usual. Before breakfast he had been engaged for two hours helping to arrange business matters with Mr. Grenfell, and after breakfast he was sent for to the mission-house to identify goods that had been stolen from the store from time to time during the last few months. He came home about eleven o'clock, very ill with ague, which soon developed into malignant fever. During the week which followed he was very weak, scarcely able to retain any nourishment, but remaining perfectly calm and patient to the end. He felt that "all was well," whatever might be the issue, and committed himself and all his concerns into the safe keeping of Him who had been the guide of his youth.

'On the day before his death he seemed somewhat better, though evidently weaker, and hopes were entertained of getting him on board a steamer for change along the coast, or for Scotland, if possible. But next morning there was pain in the chest and difficulty in breathing, and about ten o'clock the messenger came to call him to enter into the joy of his Lord.'

Had anything come of George Thomson's seven years of work? The *Memoir*, published three years after his death, in 1881, is inconclusive:

At first sight there may seem to be nothing accomplished; yet even a noble attempt is worth something, if only to show that Christian zeal and self-denial are not dead. But, further, roads were partially made, the confidence of the tribes in the mountains gained, a site fixed, and a wooden building, though only a temporary one, put up.

Any going to the work now will find his work made all the easier by the fact that George Thomson had preceded him. The need is still clamant; surely his example, his efforts, will not be wholly lost.

Yet, as reported in the last *Newsletter*, something must have happened:

The station [George Thomson] established upon the mountain at the elevation of 3,000 feet is now occupied by a Roman Catholic mission, and their health has been little, if at all, better than that of other Roman Catholics at a lower level.

There would be little reason in Mary Kingsley's comment, written in 1895, if no such station existed.

And according to McFadzean,

The structure which he built still survives but has been incorporated into a larger establishment.

Short of visiting and surveying the site, it is difficult to know what was built and what remains. However, according to Thomson family material, Isabella Thomson ultimately sold her husband's commercial interests in Victoria to the German firm of Woermann & Co. Woermann, which had trading and shipping interests in down the west coast of Africa as far as Angola, still exists, headquartered in the 'Africahaus' in Hamburg. Was it they who ultimately paid for the construction of the station, or George's fellow missionaries, or Isabella herself?

Thomson and the retail rivals

THERE WAS a time when Sauchiehall Street teemed with department stores. When Glasgow's principal shopping streets could, in the popular mind, be separated fairly rigidly between the up-market Buchanan, the middle-class Sauchiehall, and the decidedly working class Argyle Street.

When shops only opened for five and a half days a week, Sauchiehall Street always closed on Saturday afternoon. More 'working class' customers did their shopping in the slightly more down-market Argyle Street, where the shops closed on Tuesday afternoons.

www.scottishculture.about.com

Thomson came too late, perhaps, to achieve any major building in Buchanan Street, though a fairly early piece of work was shopfitting the offices of the Garnkirk Fireclay Company in 1857 at the top end of it (at 243 Buchanan Street, close to the junction with Sauchiehall Street).

'The 1891 guide mentions "the extremely commodious offices and showrooms of the company at the corner of Buchanan Street and Sauchiehall Street..." while Gildard wrote of "the depending scroll on each side of the pilasters... in wood in a shop front in Buchanan Street..." and of "the magnificent [vase] in fireclay... of which you may see copies in the windows of the Garnkirk Warehouse in Buchanan Street." The special chimney pots designed by Thomson for many of his buildings were made at the Garnkirk Works near Glasgow.



John Cannan, salesman for the Garnkirk Fireclay Co., contributed to the Thomson Memorial Fund in 1876.

G. Stamp, 'List of Works',
*Alexander Thomson: the
Unknown Genius*

When the department store ruled in Glasgow, Sauchiehall Street could boast, among others, Pettigrew & Stephens, Copeland & Lye, Daly's, Treron et Cie and Watt Bros. Of these, only the last remains.

Yet their disappearance is simply a repetition of a change in Glasgow shopping habits experienced a century earlier. As the book celebrating the Silver Jubilee of Copeland & Lye recorded in 1923:

It is but a little over fifty years ago since the great mercantile businesses of Glasgow were located at or near the Cross. The district around about the corner of the High Street and Gallowgate was known to the old Glasgow merchants as 'The Golden Acre,' a designation charged with a ripe significance that whets the financial appetite. It was said that no merchant had ever failed who had been fortunate in securing a stance in that coveted area. What we may designate the westward movement was in full swing half a century ago, and the erection of premises to meet the change did much to improve the amenities of Argyle Street, Buchanan Street, and Sauchiehall Street.

It was in the westward airt of the city that Copland & Lye launched their business barque; it might be more correct to say the north-western, Cowcaddens having been the scene of their initial venture. They took a five years' lease of the premises 110 to 114 Cowcaddens, and therein they opened business in the year 1873.... The building which they leased had just been built – but not occupied – as a couple of shops, and to suit the enterprising tenants the proprietor converted these shops into a single shop. Before themselves the two partners set one great, guiding principle, to sell goods only of reliable quality, to charge the smallest margin of remunerative profit compatible with solvency and progress, and to sell for cash only. Admittedly that was a sound foundation, well and truly laid, upon which to rear a solid business fabric. Subsequent events have more than justified the principles of equity which guided the business career of the two gentlemen who laid the foundations of the Caledonian House.

The block of tenements with warehouse space and shops below was indeed new, having been constructed in 1872 for J. & J. Jardine, masons & builders. The Cowcaddens Cross building comprised a curved masonry facade and cast iron frame behind, with the shops divided by thin timber partitions to permit flexibility of use (a convenient design feature for Messrs Copland & Lye's purposes).

The pair were highly successful, and within five years



Photo from the Virtual Mitchell collection. www.mitchelllibrary.org

had commissioned a new 'Caledonian House' building in Sauchiehall Street, in a Corinthian style (*above*) by James Boucher, into which they moved in 1880.

In Sauchiehall Street, Copland & Lye's immediate neighbour was J.J. Burnet's Fine Arts Institute (*below*), while one door along were rivals Pettigrew & Stephens, boys' and men's outfitters.

Their Manchester House experienced various additions inside and out, principally by John Keppie in 1896-7, who remodelled earlier buildings in the French Renaissance style, while a design for a chapter house by his assistant, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, furnished the dome. By 1922, Pettigrew & Stephens were instructing Keppie & Henderson to alter the ground floor of a former



Photo from Gomme & Walker, 'Architecture of Glasgow'



Photo from the Virtual Mitchell collection. www.mitchelllibrary.org

hotel they now occupied at the rear of Manchester House, fronting Bath Street.

This was Thomson's own Alexandra Hotel (*above*), itself a reconstruction of an older building, with the addition of a top floor and an extension to Sauchiehall Lane at the rear.

Under construction in December 1875, the hotel had a 45 foot frontage to Bath Street and a 97 foot frontage to West Campbell Street and contained 64 bedrooms. In 1877 the *Builder* noted that the building was plain except for the upper storey where there were "pilasters and a well proportioned truss, the whole surmounted by a massive cornice... Mounting the flight of stairs from Bath-street the visitor finds himself in a handsome reception-room, lighted by two large windows of plate-glass, reaching almost from floor to roof, a height of 16 ft., and all the decorations and appointments of which are appropriate and luxurious. The coffee-room is placed at the end of the hall, the extremity of the room near Bath-street being a sort of

continuous window, in front of which runs a balcony supporting evergreen plants. This room is 40 ft. in length, 28 ft. in width, and 16 ft. high." The external rusticated masonry facing of the ground floor was in pre-cast sections.... A design for the 'International Hotel, Bath Street' by A. & G. Thomson & Turnbull was exhibited at the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts in 1877.

G. Stamp, op. cit

The whole site was cleared in the 1970s: Sauchiehall Street's rule as the home of the department store was coming to an end as mergers and

further changes in shopping habits took their toll. The Fine Arts Institute was pulled down after a fire in 1967; the remaining buildings disappeared with the construction of the Sauchiehall Street Centre from 1973. Two years before, Thomson's Cowcaddens Cross building came down as part of the redevelopment of the area in the wake of the M8. Treron's and Daly's would both survive into the 1980s.

Interestingly, two items from the two big Sauchiehall Street rivals remain: Mackintosh's cupola for Pettigrew & Stephens, after residing for some time at Hill House in Helensburgh, found a home in the Hunterian Art Gallery. And in Milngavie, at the junction of Douglas and Main Streets, can be found a three-faced clock (*left*), donated by Copeland & Lye to Milngavie Town Council in 1971, restored, and re-erected in 1981.



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St Vincent Street

Continued from Page 5

there is planning consent for a 74-bed hotel. One residential feature will be the creation of apartments-cum-offices with around 500sq ft of workspace for those who want to combine home and workplace. The work is being carried out on a speculative basis and there are no tenants lined up for the hotel, restaurant or bar.

Alan Baxter, a director of Slater, Hogg & Howison, the sole selling agent for the development, said "Glasgow is following other post-industrial cities such as Leeds, Nottingham and Sheffield and reclaiming the city centre for residential use.

"These apartments will be offering a much higher

specification than has been seen in Glasgow until now. People are wanting to be city centre dwellers now that there are cafes, restaurants, shops and clubs that open until late. We are anticipating a varied buyer profile, including people who have taken early retirement, but still have meaningful income."

FM Developments have previously undertaken several developments in Edinburgh. According to DTZ Residential's blurb for one of their Edinburgh projects, "FM Developments have extensive experience of providing distinctive luxury properties designed to blend harmoniously with their surroundings and create a pleasant living environment."

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